



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on November 24, 2014

## Fired Or Not, Defense Chief Hagel Will Soon Be Gone

Is he walking away or being shoved out the door? That's the subject likely to be discussed and debated over the next few days, after President Obama announced the resignation of Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel at a White House ceremony Monday.

"Forced Out: Obama Announces Chuck Hagel's Resignation" was the headline over the story on the NBC News website only moments after the White House ceremony, which began shortly after 11 a.m. Reports of the pending departure had appeared on the Internet hours earlier, with several news sources crediting the *New York Times* with breaking the story.



"Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel is stepping down under pressure," the *Times* stated, "the first cabinet-level casualty of the collapse of President Obama's Democratic majority in the Senate and the struggles of his national security team amid an onslaught of global crises." The report, based on unnamed sources, said Obama's "decision to remove Mr. Hagel, 68" was described by officials "as recognition that the threat from the Islamic State would require a different kind of skills than those that Mr. Hagel was brought on to employ."

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Speculations about Hagel's resignation and the reasons for it were in marked contrast to the flowery tributes the president and his defense chief paid each other during the formal announcement. They also appear to conflict with at least one source who told the *Times* that it was Hagel who had initiated a dialogue with the president about his future. Hagel, a former two-term (1997-2009) Republican senator from Nebraska, succeeded Leon Panetta as defense secretary in February 2013. That version was affirmed by the president in the opening moments of the announcement.

"Last month, Chuck came to me to discuss the final quarter of my presidency, and determined that having guided the department through this transition, it was an appropriate time for him to complete his service," said the president, as he praised the secretary's service, dropping no hint of any friction between the Hagel and himself or other members of the administration's national security team. While not stating categorically that the determination to "complete his service" was made by Hagel himself, the president in his remarks clearly implied it.

"If there's one thing I know about Chuck, it's that he does not make this or any other decision lightly," said Obama, who recalled their friendship began "when I was just a green-behind-the ears freshman senator." Obama, who was elected senator from Illinois in 2004, served with Hagel on the Foreign Relations Committee, where Hagel came eventually to drop his support for the Iraq War. The war, which Obama had opposed from the start, was growing unpopular with the public and with congressional Democrats especially.



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Hagel's turn against the war created a rift between himself and many of his fellow Republicans, however. His confirmation was a grueling process during which he struggled to give coherent responses to probing questions, including a hostile grilling by Senator John McCain (R-Ariz.) over Hagel's opposition to the 2007 "surge" of U.S. troops in Iraq. McCain has often claimed credit for urging that policy on President George W. Bush and has, along with others, credited the surge with having turned the tide against the anti-government forces. McCain, the leading congressional critic of Obama's foreign policy, has long been calling for the bombing of Syrian airfields and other facilities, as well as arming both the Syrian rebels and anti-Russian forces in Ukraine. The Arizona senator, who is expected to become chairman of the Armed Services Committee in January, is also said to be [urging a more forceful military campaign](#) against Islamic State forces in Iraq and Syria.

"Secretary Chuck Hagel and I have had our differences over many years, but I have always considered him a friend, a patriot, and a dedicated public servant who has always put our country first and the needs of our men and women in uniform above his own," McCain, said in a statement released Monday.

Hagel is the only Republican on Obama's national security team, and the president hailed the secretary's service as an example of putting the nation ahead of party. "We come from different parties, but in accepting this position, you sent a powerful message, especially to those in this city, that when it comes to our national security and our military families, our country always comes first," Obama said. Hagel, flanked by Obama and Vice President Biden, thanked both men for their friendship and support during a time when the defense secretary has presided over the winding down of the U.S. war in Afghanistan and the military mission to aid in the Ebola crisis in West Africa and build up of a military response to the Islamic State waging war in both Iraq and Syria.

But he may have had a hard time anticipating the sometimes abrupt shifts and turns in Obama's foreign and military policies. According to the *Times*, Hagel "raised the ire of the White House in August" by calling the Islamic State an "imminent threat to every interest that we have" and a danger "beyond anything that we've seen." That flatly and dramatically contradicted the president's assessment months earlier in which he publicly likened the jihadist group to a junior varsity basketball team. Yet it was in early August that Obama began a bombing campaign against ISIS in Iraq and by mid-September he was bombing in Syria as well — all without congressional authorization, as required by the Constitution. On September 10, the president delivered a speech to the nation, warning of the potential threat to the United States from the Islamic State, though in far less melodramatic terms than Hagel had used. Obama has also pledged repeatedly that he would not send ground forces back into Iraq, while General Martin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has twice testified in Congress that progress, or lack of it, in the war against ISIS may require the reintroduction of American combat units. The president has, meanwhile, steadily increased the number of U.S. military advisors on the ground, training and assisting Iraq forces, to the current level of about 3,000.

The first enlisted combat veteran to become secretary of defense, Hagel was an Army sergeant during the Vietnam War. "He's been in the dirt. He's been in the mud," Obama said in paying tribute to his retiring defense chief. "He volunteered for Vietnam and still has the scars and shrapnel from the battles he has fought." Hagel said he will stay on at the Pentagon until a new secretary is nominated and confirmed by the Senate, which will likely be early next year. *USA Today* noted that Obama will be the first president since Truman to have four defense secretaries under his command.

The president has been stung by criticisms in books and media interviews by Panetta, a longtime Democratic policy advisor, and his first secretary of defense, Robert Gates, a Republican who also held



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the office during the second term of George W. Bush. Both men faulted Obama for being indecisive and inconsistent in military matters. Panetta, for example, said the president should have armed the Syrian rebels in their civil war against the regime of Bashar al-Assad. He has also faulted the president for not taking military action against Assad after reports surfaced that the Syrian government had used chemical weapons in that war, despite Obama's public declaration that Damascus would be crossing a "red line" with grave consequences by using such weapons. Later reports have indicated [uncertainty about which side](#) let loose the poison gas, and Assad agreed to turn over his chemical weapons to international control.

Names bandied about as possible successors to Hagel include former Undersecretary of Defense Michèle A. Flournoy, former Deputy Secretary Ashton B. Carter, and Senator Jack Reed (D-R.I.) a former officer with the Army's 82nd Airborne. Whoever is in charge at the Pentagon, future U.S. military actions may indicate whether Hagel's coming departure is to pave the way for greater U.S. warmaking around the world.



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